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Gorbachev says U.S. 'scuttling' peace zone

MOSCOW (AP) — Mikhail S. Gorbachev told a correspondent from India that the United States is scuttling efforts to make the Indian Ocean a peace zone, the official news agency Tass reported yesterday.

Mr. Gorbachev's comment was made Saturday to S.P.K. Gupta, a Moscow-based correspondent of the Press Trust of India news agency, in his first interview with a foreign journalist as top Soviet leader.

The interview came three days before a scheduled official visit to Moscow by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India, who met Mr. Gorbachev briefly in March during the funeral of former Soviet President Konstantin U. Chernenko. (Mr. Gandhi is scheduled to visit the United States from June 12 to 15.)

Mr. Gupta said he received a response to written questions submitted in advance and also conversed with Mr. Gorbachev during their 50-minute meeting.

In a written response, Mr. Gorbachev accused the United States of blocking moves to make the Indian Ocean a "zone of peace."

"It is common knowledge that for a number of years now, the United States has been scuttling the convening of an international conference on this issue," Mr. Gorbachev was quoted as saying in a text issued by Tass.

"It has also unilaterally broken off the Soviet-American talks on limiting military activities in the Indian Ocean," Mr. Gorbachev was quoted as saying. "In the meantime, the United States is constantly building up its military presence there."

U.S.-Soviet negotiations stalled in the summer of 1979 after a U.N.-sponsored meeting to implement a 1971 U.N. General Assembly resolution led to disagreement over the extent to which the ocean should be demilitarized.

Cyrus Vance, then U.S. secretary of state, indicated in February 1978 that completion of an Indian Ocean treaty was being deliberately delayed to protest Soviet military involvement in the Horn of Africa.

The United States has a leased naval base on the island of Diego Garcia, 1,200 miles south of the southern tip of India. U.S. Navy ships guard the Persian Gulf oil routes and counter Soviet ships which patrol the Pacific and Indian oceans from a base in Vietnam.

Mr. Gorbachev said the United States should seriously consider Soviet calls for

a nuclear weapons freeze, a ban on space-weapons research, a nuclear test ban and a halt to missile deployments in Europe.

He said he hoped to visit India "in due time" in response to an invitation from Mr. Gandhi.

Mr. Gorbachev also recalled Saturday his April 7 pledge to halt deployment of Soviet missiles in Europe until November in an effort to improve the negotiating climate for the Geneva arms control talks that started March 12.

The United States has said a Western moratorium would merely preserve a Soviet nuclear superiority in Europe.

"We are entitled to hope for a more serious and thoughtful assessment of our initiative by Washington and its NATO partners, and for restraint in American missile deployments in Western Europe," Mr. Gorbachev said.

[Despite Mr. Gorbachev's assertions regarding a U.S. military build-up in the area, experts here believe there is now a rough equivalence of forces in the Indian Ocean.

[Ray S. Cline, former deputy director of the CIA and currently at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies, yesterday labelled Mr. Gorbachev's appeal as a "superficial propaganda ploy" aimed at an Indian audience. "Nobody takes seriously negotiations on a zone of peace for the Indian Ocean," he added, "including the Indians."

[The Indian Ocean remains strategically important, Mr. Cline said, for both superpowers because it "is a connecting link between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as well as an approach to the Persian Gulf and the Malacca Straits.]